

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Houston Bar Center

AGENDA ITEM: B.1

OWNERS: Supreme Bright Houston, LLC

HPO FILE NO.: 17L322

APPLICANTS: Mehul Patel

DATE ACCEPTED: 6/29/2017

LOCATION: 723 Main Street Houston, TX 77002

HAHC HEARING DATE: 7/26/2017

SITE INFORMATION: Lots 6 & 12, Tracts 1A, 2B & 7A Block 80, South Side of Buffalo Bayou, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes ten-story office building.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Houston Bar Center Building at 723 Main Street is an excellent Houston example of New Formalist architecture and of a national trend to remodel, re-skin and “modernize” outdated early twentieth century buildings in the post-World War II period. Houston’s embrace of Modernism as a fresh new architectural style caused many buildings in the city’s central business district to be slipcovered or extensively remodeled in the 1945-1970 period.

Architect Eugene Slater’s interpretation of New Formalism at 723 Main Street resulted in the introduction into downtown Houston of a signature example of the style, at once a speculative office building yet at the same time up-to-date with the latest real estate ventures elsewhere in the city.

The Houston Bar Center Building has also been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) as a 1960s modernist building, and it was officially listed in the NRHP on June 26, 2017.

The Houston Bar Center at 723 Main Street meets Criteria 1, 4, and 5 for Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

The extensive remodeling and transformation of the two earlier twentieth century building into the Houston Bar Center Building in 1966 represents Houston’s downtown development during the national energy downturn of the late 1960s. During those years in the central business district, only property owners with substantial assets could afford to build new, or extensively remodel older buildings in a slumping real estate market. The Houston Bar Center Building began as two adjacent 10-story towers in 1913 and 1915 designed by Houston architect Alfred C. Finn and developed by Jesse H. Jones (1874-1956), one of the city’s most energetic and successful entrepreneurs. Jones and his wife Mary Gibbs Jones (who died in 1962) upon his death in 1956 passed much of their wealth and real estate assets to the philanthropic non-profit Houston Endowment, including the combined then-named Gulf Building Annex (and Old Gulf Building) at 723 Main Street. The Houston Endowment assigned its in-house architect

Eugene Slater, hired by Jones immediately after graduation in 1946 from Rice University, to design the extensive 1966 remodeling in the New Formalist style.

The Buildings at 715 and 723 Main Street

In 1913 Marcellus E. Foster, president of the *Houston Chronicle*, by then a major investment in Jesse Jones' portfolio, commissioned Houston architect Alfred Charles Finn to design the first of the two buildings, the Foster Building at 715-719 Main Street. In 1918, its significant tenants included the Great Southern Life Insurance Company, Humble Oil & Refining Company, Gulf Production Company, and the first office for Houston-based international law firm Vinson & Elkins.¹ Many other smaller tenants related to the oil and gas industry occupied the remaining lease space.

Jones himself commissioned Finn to design the second building in 1915 at 723 Main Street, and joined the two internally in 1929. The Gulf Production Company took several floors and thus the building became known as the "Gulf Building." During the 1920s, tenants still were predominantly related to oil and gas, and the Gulf Company was still the major tenant with several floors of occupancy. The law firm of Vinson & Elkins, then Vinson Elkins Wood & Sweepon, had expanded their operations to include two more offices. The National Bank of Commerce, Jesse Jones' main bank, installed its Directors' Room in the building, and other spaces were leased to railroad and insurance companies.²

Zoe & Capitol Theater

The Zoe Theater opened at 715 Main in October 1914 and showed moving pictures on a single screen in the rear of the ground floor of the Foster Building. The theater space is extant and the one-story barrel-vaulted room occupies the northwest corner of the property. In 1918, the Texas Amusement Company was listed as the proprietor of the Zoe, the Liberty (across the street at 718 Main) and the Queen (one block to the north at 613 Main).³ At this time 11 theaters opened onto Main Street between the 200-700 blocks, and still more occupied surrounding downtown streets.⁴ The Foster Building space was renamed the Capitol Theater in 1922.⁵ By 1925, the Capitol, Liberty, and Queen Theaters were operated by Southern Enterprises of Texas with Harry van Demark as the city manager.⁶ By the 1930-31 issue of Houston's city directory, the Capitol or Liberty theaters were not named and had presumably closed.⁷ For a time, architect Alfred Finn officed on the second floor of the Foster building directly above the entrance to the Zoe Theater. Finn's office designed alterations in 1927 the Zoe's successor Capitol Theater.⁸

¹ 1918 Houston City Directory.

² 1923-1924 Houston City Directory.

³ Houston City Directory, 1918.

⁴ Houston City Directory, 1918.

⁵ Welling, David. *Cinema Houston: from Nickelodeon to Megaplex*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

⁶ Houston City Directory, 1915.

⁷ Houston City Directory, 1930-31.

⁸ Houston Public Library. *Alfred C. Finn: Builder of Houston*. Houston: Houston Public Library, 1983. Job 368 "Capitol Theatre Alterations, Main Street (see job 100)"

The combined building, named the Gulf Building and Gulf Building Annex for its primary tenant in its middle years, remained under the ownership of Jones and his philanthropic foundation Houston Endowment until it was donated to the Moody Foundation of Galveston between 1969 and 1979, the result of a divestment of physical property after a change to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) laws.⁹ The Moody Foundation later sold the building, and several private owners managed the property¹⁰ until the current owners purchased the building in 2016.

Eugene “Gene” William Slater

Eugene William “Gene” Slater was born in South Bend, Indiana, in November 1925.¹¹ In high school, Slater enjoyed drafting and found part time and seasonal employment at a local butcher.¹² In 1943 he joined the U.S. Navy Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC), and moved with the ROTC program to Rice University in Houston without being called to active duty during World War II. At Rice, Slater studied under Jimmy Chillman and James Morehead, and Dean of Architecture William Ward Watkin, all influenced by the popular national and international Ecole des Beaux-Arts holistic approach to design. Slater completed the university’s five-year architecture degree in 1946 at the age of 21,¹³ and began part time work for Jesse Jones’ National Bank of Commerce and Houston Endowment just as Jones returned to Houston permanently from Washington, D.C. Slater worked part time at the Endowment for two years before joining as a full time employee in 1948.¹⁴ Slater and J. Russ Baty were the only architects on staff and their work primarily involved interior maintenance on Jones’ many buildings.¹⁵ Baty had worked for Alfred Finn for a number of years before he began working directly for Jones. When Russ Baty retired in the mid-1950s, Slater took over all of the work for Houston Endowment’s real estate holdings.¹⁶ In a 1991 oral history interview for the Houston Metropolitan Research Center Archives, Slater recalled that his first assignment was designing a small lease space for Eastern Airlines in the Rice Hotel in 1946, back when “all the airlines and the train stations all had hotel offices back in those days.”¹⁷ When the Internal Revenue Service required foundations such as the Houston Endowment to divest its many real estate holdings, Slater’s workload dramatically decreased. The Endowment kept Slater on its payroll, but the position was not filled when Slater retired. He died in August 2012 in Austin.¹⁸

⁹ “About Us,” *Houston Endowment*, accessed 14 June 2016, <<http://www.houstonendowment.org/About/Overview.aspx>>

¹⁰ “Ownership History 00108000000013,” Harris County Appraisal District. Accessed 20 June 2016.

¹¹ “Eugene Slater,” *Houston Chronicle*, obituary, published 15 Aug, 2012.

¹² “Gene Slater,” Houston Oral History Project, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 22, 1991. Accessed June 13, 2016 < http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/gene-slater_OH406.php>

¹³ “Gene Slater,” Houston Oral History Project, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 22, 1991. Accessed June 13, 2016 < http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/gene-slater_OH406.php>

¹⁴ “Gene Slater,” Houston Oral History Project, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 22, 1991. Accessed June 13, 2016 < http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/gene-slater_OH406.php>

¹⁵ “Gene Slater,” Houston Oral History Project, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 22, 1991. Accessed June 13, 2016 < http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/gene-slater_OH406.php>

¹⁶ “Gene Slater,” Houston Oral History Project, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 22, 1991. Accessed June 13, 2016 < http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/gene-slater_OH406.php>

¹⁷ “Gene Slater,” Houston Oral History Project, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 22, 1991. Accessed June 13, 2016 < http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/gene-slater_OH406.php>

¹⁸ “Eugene Slater,” *Houston Chronicle*, obituary, published 15 Aug, 2012.

During his career, Slater worked more on remodeling projects than on new buildings. In his 1991 oral history for the Houston Metropolitan Research Center of the Houston Public Library, he admitted preferring projects with “defined problems” where he was given existing space to work within, rather than new projects with no existing physical parameters.¹⁹ Early projects in his career included the National Standard Building (demolished) and the Rice Hotel garage. Slater called much of his work “maintenance architecture,” which included designing building interiors rather than exteriors or public spaces, applying his talents to redesigning leased office spaces in professional buildings. He explained, “I don’t think many people appreciate the maintenance—I call it the maintenance–architecture that goes into keeping up buildings.... Really that’s where the work starts. When a building is finished the first time, you’re through with it, but remodeling of that building goes on forever as long as the building is there.”²⁰

In 1966, Slater, trained at Rice under a Beaux-Arts curriculum yet entering employment in post-World War II Houston when the city’s embrace of Modernist was at its height, removed all of the building’s Gothic Revival style elements including terracotta finials and parapet cresting, terracotta pilasters, canopy, original storefronts and the triple- and quadruple-grouped hopper windows. He applied entirely new features to the exterior including spandrels of a highly polished synthetic granite product called “Granux,” in the color “opalescent mahogany.”²¹ New fixed aluminum-framed dark gray tinted windows replaced the hopper windows, fitting four fixed single-pane windows into the openings on the Main Street façade and six single-pane windows on the Rusk elevation. The original terracotta coping on the Main and Rusk Street elevations (northwest and southwest, respectively) at the roofline was also replaced with an unornamented white marble band. A continuous steel framed stucco clad canopy with aluminum fascia was installed over the sidewalk along both Main and Rusk streets. The result transformed the building into a New Formalist mid-rise office tower with ground floor marble clad *piloti* infilled with glass storefronts. The *piloti* continue above the storefront and produce a vertical emphasis and regular Classical column grid infilled with tinted windows and splayed red granite spandrels.

The remodeling continued with extensive changes to the interior. Entrance doors were replaced with paired aluminum framed doors with side lights and transoms, and a vestibule installed on the Main Street facade. The original 3-part storefront was replaced with a fixed metal framed system. In the Main Street lobby, the walls were covered by book-matched white marble with grey veining, a small black granite baseboard, and new terrazzo flooring, and the elevators and staircase doors were covered with stainless steel. The terrazzo flooring was covered in a later remodeling with granite tiles, yet a part of the original flooring material is extant in the fire stair landing. Acoustical ceiling tiles were installed and painted black.

Elsewhere on the interior, the 1966 redesign introduced air conditioning to every floor, and a set of metal framed standardized doors was introduced; the doors are an unpainted wood veneer. The upper levels

¹⁹ Gene Slater, “Houston Oral History Project, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 22, 1991. Accessed June 13, 2016 < http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/gene-slater_OH406.php >

²⁰ “Gene Slater,” Houston Oral History Project, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 22, 1991. Accessed June 13, 2016 < http://digital.houstonlibrary.net/oral-history/gene-slater_OH406.php >

²¹ 1967 remodel drawings courtesy of the owner.

were deliberately designed to allow tenants to adapt their spaces to best suit their needs. The only consistent space on each of the upper floors is the elevator lobby, adjacent mechanical and restrooms in the north corridor and maintenance closet, and fire stair in the east corridor. Many of the 1966 door frames remain and some of the original and unpainted wood veneered doors.

Architectural historian and former University of Texas at Austin professor Marcus Whiffen, summarizing New Formalism in his textbook *American Architecture Since 1780*, noted that “the successes of the New Formalism in the American of the 1960’s is not hard to account for.”

In an affluent society it lent itself to the use of expensive materials (as well as of materials that only look expensive); in a society that aspired to culture it flattered the spectator with references to the past; in a conservative society it suggested that *old forms need only be restyled to fit them to new needs* [emphasis added].²²

Modern Architecture in the Postwar World (1945-1976)

[The following two historic contexts excerpts: **Modern Architecture in the Postwar World (1945-1976)** and **Modern Architecture in Houston (1945-1976)** are taken from the 2015 National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form entitled, *Modernist Commercial, Governmental, and Institutional Buildings in Houston, Texas, 1945-1976*.²³ This MPD Form has not yet been submitted to the National Park Service.]

Modernism in twentieth century world cultures, also referred to as the Modern Movement, arose during the first third of the twentieth century in response to the numerous advancements in technology and the extensive growth of cities following the industrialization of western society. It spans the arts, literature, religion, politics, the organization of society, and architecture. As a philosophy, its followers attempted to depart from traditional practices of the past and form new methods based upon the technological advancements of the present. Architectural historians avoid specifically defining Modernism because of the breadth of materials and characteristics found in building styles that rejected traditional precedents through the Modern Movement between roughly 1900 and 1976.²⁴ As architects abandoned traditional styles and embraced new materials and technologies, a number of new architectural sub-styles, schools, and theories of design formed, all of which fall under the larger classification of Modernism.

The Modern Movement can be divided into two waves corresponding to the development of Modernist architecture and the disruption of World War II. The first wave occurred prior to World War I with Art Nouveau Arts & Crafts, Viennese Secession, and other stylistic rebellions of traditionally trained artists and architects. Following the horrors of WWI and the collapse of many traditional cultural precedents, Modernist architects further reduced buildings to their most basic forms, and sought to utilize architecture as a means to improve quality of life through buildings and spaces.²⁵ The dominant post-WWI styles of this first wave include: Art Deco, Art Moderne, Stripped Classical, and less commonly in the U.S. but most significantly, the early stirrings of the International Style.²⁶ All of these show an attempt to distance new architecture from past styles by minimalizing ornament to various degrees.

²² Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, page 264.

²³ Cynkar, Grace, Kristen Brown, Anna Mod, and James Steely. “Modernist Commercial, Governmental, and Institutional Buildings in Houston, Texas, 1945–1976.” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2015.

²⁴ Robinson and Foell, *GSA Buildings*, 12.

²⁵ Prudon, *Preservation of Modern Architecture*, 2.

²⁶ Robinson and Foell, *GSA Buildings*, 12.

The second wave of the Modern Movement, often referred to as Midcentury Modernism, drew heavily from both the International Style and the evolution of Arts & Crafts into middle-class housing, institutions, commercial, religious, retail; no post war building type was excluded. The second wave occurred in the U. S. after World War II and extended from the late 1940s when Modernism was broadly embraced as a commercial building style, to the 1970s, when historical references and ornament begin to reappear in trend-setting architecture.²⁷

Pre-War Modernist styles including Art Deco and Art Moderne retained some Classical influences such as compositions of base, shaft, and cornice and the use of simplified and abstracted Classical features including columns, entablatures, and friezes. In Art Deco, architects utilized angular, geometric forms and stylized sculptural ornamentation to update and simplify the Classical vocabulary. In the later styles, Art Moderne and Streamline Moderne, architects used curvilinear lines, linear ornamentation such as grooves or stringcourses, and asymmetry to push further away from the Classical precedents. Alfred C. Finn's 1929 Gulf Building (NRHP 1983), inspired by Eliel Saarinen's Art Deco tower design, is an example of Art Deco Style architecture in Houston. The 1939 Houston City Hall (NRHP 1990) by Joseph Finger is an example of the Art Moderne Style. Happening concurrently to these other pre-war styles were new developments in Europe. The pioneers of Modern architecture were designing in a new style that focused on industrial materials and the raw expression of structure and function. Classical elements were not utilized in these new styles, yet Classical plans and massing continued, along with scale keyed to the human figure. Examples of this influential early Modern architecture include the 1925 Fagus Factory in Berlin, designed by Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer; the 1929 Barcelona Pavilion by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; Villa Savoye (1930) and Villa Stein (1927) by Le Corbusier; the 1929 Lovell House by Richard Neutra; and the 1932 PSFS Building in Philadelphia, designed by George Howe and William Lescaze.

Many of the early Modernists working in Europe had emigrated to the U.S. prior to or during the war, taking teaching positions at fledgling architectural programs that embraced the new styles. Walter Gropius, for example, worked at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, and Mies van der Rohe directed the architecture program at the Armour (later Illinois) Institute of Technology. Both of these schools became hotbeds of learning and innovation for a new generation of architects wanting to work in Modernist technologies and styles. As the pursuit of this evolving approach to architecture progressed, architects designed according to various Modernist-leaning architectural philosophies and schools, which led to a number of sub-styles. Thus, following WWII the second wave of the Modern Movement in the U.S., Midcentury Modernism began. Architects generally departed dramatically from traditional Classical influences, including restriction of scale and proportions to the human occupant. Between the late 1940s and the 1970s in the U.S., some seven Modernist sub-styles emerged: International, Miesian, Wrightian, Functionalism, New Formalism, Brutalism, and Expressionism. Despite its "post" prefix, early Postmodernist elements begin to creep into building designs as early as the late 1950s.²⁸ The divisions between these Modern styles are often fluid with elements of one or more being used in the same building. Similarly, in the experimental spirit of Modernism, some buildings are outliers and fall into none of the subcategories.

The International Style was one of the most dominant Modernist sub-styles. Phillip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock are credited with giving this style its name in the title of their book, *The International Style* that served as the catalog for an exhibit of modern architecture in 1932 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City.²⁹ Many of the 1920s and 1930s buildings featured in the exhibit were located in Europe. This style followed

²⁷ Robinson and Foell, *GSA Buildings*, 12-13.

²⁸ City of Phoenix Historic Preservation Office and Ryden Architects, Midcentury Marvels: Commercial Architecture of Phoenix 1945-1975. Phoenix: City of Phoenix, 2010, 26.

²⁹ City of Phoenix Historic Preservation Office, Midcentury Marvels, 26.

several general tenets: indifference to setting, emphasis of planar and cubic forms, absence of ornamentation, and a preference for new materials and construction techniques.³⁰ Architects using this style sought to create a universal building type that did not acknowledge its site or regional influences. In some cases, these buildings are set on piers or *pilotis*, making each building seem to float above the ground. The ground floor *piloti* may be left open to the elements or encased in glass. Typically, for low-rise buildings, the International Style presents as an emphasis on horizontality with horizontal bands or ribbons of windows and cantilevered roof eaves. On high-rise buildings, this style emphasizes verticality, with columns and window muntins used to accentuate this effect. All International Style buildings feature flat roofs, sometimes free of eaves, lending a box-like nature to the style. The buildings typically showcase industrial materials such as concrete, steel beams, plate glass, slab doors, and metal window frames.³¹ Early examples of this style include the 1926 Bauhaus School by Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye from 1930, and Richard Neutra's Lovell House built in California in 1929. Postwar examples include the 1952 Lever House (NRHP 1983) in New York City designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), and the 1952 United Nations (UN) Secretariat Building by Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier in New York City. Houston's first International Style downtown skyscraper is the Melrose Building (NRHP 2014) of 1952 designed by Lloyd & Morgan who later went on to partner with Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson to design the Houston Astrodome (NRHP 2014).

The International Style is a term sometimes interchangeable with the Miesian Style, since the latter also features modern materials, flat roofs, cubic forms, and the absence of ornamentation. However, although the Miesian Style is indeed part of the International Style, the reverse is not true. The International Style includes buildings that utilize flat white planes, such as those featured in the MoMA exhibit. The Miesian Style is an International Style of another type, based on the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. His buildings were highly abstracted and simplified works, typically of steel and glass construction. In his designs, Mies sought structural integrity through expression of building materials, seeking to expose the steel frames and infilled it with glass or brick. Rather than using a single horizontal or vertical emphasis, Miesian buildings typically feature a grid pattern that displays the structure of the building.³² Examples of this style include: Mies' 1951 Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois and the Mies and Philip Johnson's 1958 Seagram Building in New York City. Houston examples include the University of St. Thomas Academic Quadrangle, a series of steel, glass and brick pavilions connected via a steel walkway. Completed in 1959 and designed by Philip Johnson, the arrangements of pavilions and walkways is based on the composition and proportions of the Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia Academic Quadrangle in Charlottesville, VA (NRHP 1970). The two additions to the Museum of Fine Arts-Houston were designed by Mies van der Rohe, the only work by the architect in Texas.

New Formalism also arose as a variation of the International and Miesian Styles. This sub-style retains the emphasis on massing seen in the earlier two styles, but incorporates abstracted Classical forms and precedents. Classical forms such as columns, entablatures, colonnades, and raised podiums are reduced to abstract shapes. New Formalist buildings typically use more traditional materials such as travertine, marble, or granite, in addition to man-made materials such as precast concrete screens.³³ Examples of this building style include: Edward Durell Stone's 1954 American Embassy in New Delhi, India and Philip Johnson, Wallace K. Harrison, and Max Abramovitz's 1962-1966 Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City.

Modern Architecture in Houston (1945-1976)

³⁰ City of Phoenix Historic Preservation Office, *Midcentury Marvels*, 26.

³¹ City of Phoenix Historic Preservation Office, *Midcentury Marvels*, 26.

³² City of Phoenix Historic Preservation Office, *Midcentury Marvels*, 28.

³³ City of Phoenix Historic Preservation Office and Ryden Architects, *Midcentury Marvels: Commercial Architecture of Phoenix 1945-1975* (Phoenix: City of Phoenix, 2010), 39.

Houston participated in both waves of architectural Modernism occurring before and after World War II. During the first wave, Modernist buildings were typically either Art Deco or Moderne in style. Aside from early 1900s Arts & Crafts and Prairie School residences that signaled the coming of Modernism in Houston, the first building to attempt to break with traditional, architectural ornamentation was the 1929 Gulf Building (NRHP 1983) developed by Jesse Jones and designed by Alfred C. Finn.³⁴ Built in the Art Deco style, the building retains the Classical tripartite arrangement of base, shaft, and cornice but has restrained and stylized ornament. Three prominent examples from 1939 include the Mirabeau B. Lamar Senior High School and Houston City Hall (NRHP 1990), both designed by Joseph Finger in the Moderne Style.³⁵ The third is the 1939 Houston Fire Alarm Building by MacKie & Kamrath, accepted as the city's first modernist building, and shows a clear departure from the Classical tripartite composition and introduction of ribbon windows and a monumental entry.

Construction slowed to almost a halt during WWII but resumed shortly after. During the remainder of the 1940s elements of the basic Modern Styles, the International, Miesian, and Wrightian Styles, began to appear in Houston construction. The post-WWII, Midcentury Modernism wave occurred in Houston from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s. This wave consisted of the eight Modernist sub styles, International, Miesian, Wrightian, Functionalism, New Formalism, Brutalism, Expressionism, and Postmodernism. Beginning in the late 1940s, Houston began to see Modernist elements in new construction, particularly elements of the International and Wrightian Styles. It was not until the 1950s, however, that fully articulated examples of Midcentury Modern styles became abundant. During this first full decade of modern architecture in Houston, the International, Miesian, and Wrightian Styles were predominant with the other five sub-styles becoming more prevalent during the 1960s and 1970s.

The 1947 First City National Bank Building was the first major Houston building built after WWII and was designed by Alfred C. Finn.³⁶ The building was designed before the war and shelved until construction could commence in the late 1940s. This decade delay explains its pre-war Art Deco style, Classical tripartite composition yet its restrained ornamentation exemplifies further intrusions of modernist principles. That same year, MacKie & Kamrath built a one-story, U-shaped, office complex, now referred to as the MacKie & Kamrath Building, on Ferndale Street south of Westheimer Road.³⁷ The building housed the architecture office of MacKie & Kamrath and featured Wrightian elements such as low-pitched, gabled roofs, rough-cut stone cladding, and triangular clerestory windows.³⁸ In 1949, MacKie & Kamrath designed another Wrightian building, Weldon's Cafeteria (Lawndale Art and Performing Center since 1993) at 4912 Main Street.³⁹ The full-width canopy jutting out beyond the main building plane demonstrates the Wrightian tenet of "breaking the box."⁴⁰ Postwar religious commissions also began to incorporate elements of the Modernist styles. Congregation Emanu El, at 1500 Sunset Boulevard was completed in 1949 and designed by MacKie & Kamrath and Lenard Gabert with Wrightian elements of thin, buff brick, low-pitched gabled roof, and wood detailing.⁴¹ Foley's

³⁴ Mod, Building Modern Houston, 10.

³⁵ Mod, Building Modern Houston, 13.

³⁶ Stephen Fox, AIA Houston Architectural Guide. Houston: American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter, 2012, 43.

³⁷ Fox, AIA Houston Architectural Guide, 443.

³⁸ Mod, Building Modern Houston, 21.

³⁹ Fox, AIA Houston Architectural Guide, 161.

⁴⁰ Mod, Building Modern Houston 25.

⁴¹ Mod, Building Modern Houston, 26; Fox, AIA Houston Architectural Guide, 192.

Department Store (demolished in 2013), built in 1949 at 1100 Main Street and designed by Kenneth Franzheim, presented one of the earliest examples of Functionalism with a large, windowless box and minimal exterior ornament.⁴²

The early forays into Midcentury Modernism seen during the 1940s expanded during the 1950s when full-fledged Modernist designs began to appear in Houston. In 1950, Finger & Rustay designed Battlestein's, a high-style specialty store at 812 Main Street, in the International Style.⁴³ The ribbon windows, clean limestone façade, and simple box form all express the universal appeal of the International Style. In 1952, the Melrose Building (NRHP 2014) became Houston's first International Style skyscraper. Designed by Lloyd & Morgan, the Melrose Building at 1121 Walker Avenue features horizontal ribbon windows and concrete *brise soleils* emphasizing the stark, rectilinear elements of the International Style. In 1952, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill designed one of the first Miesian Buildings in Houston, the Great Southern Life Insurance Company Headquarters (demolished 1997). The building featured an exposed concrete structural grid with recessed windows. Several years later in 1958, Mies van der Rohe built the quintessential example of this style as an addition to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (MFAH).

New Formalism in Houston

New Formalist style buildings proliferated in Houston in the 1960s and the Houston Bar Center Building is a clear representative example of the wide embrace of the style used for iconic civic, residential and commercial building as well as ubiquitous office towers sprinkled along the post war expansion of Houston freeways. New Formalist style buildings include paired down and stylized Classical features such as arches, colonnades and podiums and their forms and scale recall Classical architecture through symmetry, geometry, and use of proportion systems. Those buildings more skillfully done tend to be designed by Beaux-Arts trained architects such as Eugene Slater whose understanding of Classical proportions and composition translated easily into a modernist vocabulary. A few representative examples of New Formalism designed by Houston architects are offered to give a sense of how popular and prolific the style was in the 1960s at the time of Slater's Houston Bar Center project. These examples are found throughout the city and includes downtown, suburban, civic, commercial and residential buildings.

Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson designed the Heights State Bank at Washington Avenue and Waugh Drive in 1962. The building has monumental arched window walls surrounding the double height interior banking lobby. The exaggerated cantilevered cornice is ornamented with stylized Gothic ribbing. Caudill Rowlett Scott designed the downtown Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts in downtown to house the city's symphony, opera, and ballet. The travertine clad building sits alone on a city block has a central interlaced circular form surrounded by a monumental colonnade of thin, square columns. The monumental and paired down Classical composition enforce the transition from the street to create a sense of arrival into the performing arts space. Inwood Manor is a New Formalist residential condo tower in the River Oaks neighborhood designed by Neuhaus & Taylor in 1966. This building takes the Classical colonnade skyward with regularly spaced arched openings and an inset window wall. A more suburban example, Jefferson Chemical, is located on Richmond Avenue, a street with a concentration of

⁴² Mod, Building Modern Houston, 24; Fox, AIA Houston Architectural Guide, 41.

⁴³ Fox, AIA Houston Architectural Guide 53.

1950s and 1960s modernist suburban office buildings. This collection of buildings represent the suburban flight of businesses from downtown in search of cheaper rents that allowed small oil, insurance, and office machine companies to construct headquarters of their own. Jefferson Chemical is a low rise commercial box form with a glass curtain wall surrounded by a colonnade of slender aluminum columns with webbed capitals; there is a glass clerestory penthouse floor.

Preservation of Modernism in Houston

In the 2000s, a trend in downtown Houston is under way to remove slipcovers downtown and restore and/or recreate in substitute materials the appearance of a building's early twentieth century appearance. Nearby examples include 900 Main, now Holy Cross Chapel, slipcovered in the post-World War II period with a stucco mono-façade that enveloped two buildings. In 2004, half of the slipcover was removed and the Art Deco building beneath was restored using historic photographs; the stucco mono-façade remains on the adjacent corner building. Diagonally across the street at 806 Main, a similar marble and tinted-glass New Formalism curtain wall had been installed over the 1910/1919 Carter Building in 1967. When the curtain wall was recently removed, the building, now the J. W. Marriott, did not retain sufficient integrity to be listed in the NRHP. The historic exterior appearance was recreated with substitute materials and some conjecture. Local preservationists are divided on its authenticity and appropriateness (despite being a highly successful redevelopment project that transformed a particularly deteriorated downtown block). These examples illustrate a twenty-first century trend to remove material from the 1960s and restore or recreate a building's early twentieth century appearance. As this trend continues, Houston risks losing much of its modernist architectural legacy from the 1940s-1960s.

The building is currently vacant and is pending redevelopment at a hotel. The redevelopment is participating in the historic tax credit program at the state and federal levels. The proposed new hotel will respect the building's New Formalist design, both on the exterior and interior.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

Site

The Houston Bar Center Building sits on the southwest corner of Block 80, of the South Side Buffalo Bayou (SSBB) plat with its six-bay façade facing west onto Main Street; the eight-bay south elevating facing onto Rusk. Block 80 is bounded by Capitol Street to the north, Main Street to the west, Fannin to the east, and Rusk to the south. A small alley bisects most of the block running generally north-to-south. The building shares the block with two National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) listed buildings: the Texas State Hotel (NRHP 2007) is directly to the east across the alley, and the Kress Building (NRHP 2002) is on the northwest corner at Capitol. The surrounding area is an urban commercial neighborhood with mid-rise buildings, skyscrapers, multi-story parking garages and surface parking lots. Other historically-designated properties in the surrounding area include the 1929 Gulf Building (NRHP 1983), Houston's iconic Art Deco skyscraper located directly west across Main Street, designed by Alfred C. Finn with Kenneth Franzheim. One block to the east on the northwest corner of Rusk and San Jacinto is The Texas Company building, or Texaco (NRHP 2003). Directly across San Jacinto from Texaco is the 1911 United States Custom House (NRHP 1974) on the northeast corner of Rusk and San Jacinto. The Houston Bar Center Building is two blocks south of the southernmost boundary of the NRHP- and

locally-designated Main Street/Market Square Historic District (NRHP 1982; 1984), Houston's late 19th and early 20th century commercial historic district that includes Allen's Landing on Buffalo Bayou, the place of the city's founding at the northern foot of Main Street.

Exterior

The building is a reinforced concrete framed, 10-story, L-plan, 6x8 bay, 2-part commercial block with dominant vertical marble clad pilasters, an unadorned marble band cornice, fixed tinted windows and polished granite-composite spandrels. The building sits on a corner and has two primary elevations. The shorter six-bay elevation, the "leg" of the L, faces west onto Main Street; the longer eight-bay elevation, the "stem," faces south onto Rusk.⁴⁴ There is a single story, double height volume in on the northeast quadrant of the property that once housed the Zoe and Capitol Theater; this space was more recently used as a nightclub. The east elevation of the theater has a gambrel end shape and measures 47 feet in length; the remaining east elevation of the L-plan tower is also 47 feet wide. A small alley to the east runs the full length of the east elevation. The Main Street facade measures approximately 94 feet in length; the Rusk elevation is approximately 159 feet.

The Main and Rusk elevations conform an architectural modernist subset style called New Formalist that expresses a Classical three part composition - base, shaft and cornice - combined with paired down, unornamented detailing. The exterior building adheres to the rigorous regularity of the structural grid while the exterior cladding uses contrasting colors, materials, and textures that add an element of material variety, texture and color to the overall composition. The upper bays on both the Main and Rusk elevations are uniform across each elevation with splayed composition spandrels of granite composite called Granux,⁴⁵ below fixed aluminum-framed windows with tinted glass. The undulating spandrels create simplified fluting, in keeping with the New Formalism style, and windows were installed using then-new curtain wall technology. The bays on the Main Street elevation are regularly divided into six window/spandrel openings and the Rusk elevation has eight divisions. A paired pilaster is in the center of the Main Street façade, a clear indication of the two former end walls of the two previously separate buildings. Directly above the full-width wraparound canopy, is a horizontal marble belt course. This horizontal band is integrated with the marble-clad pilasters, and a similar unornamented white marble cornice and creates an enframed grid composition on each primary facade. The entire area above the canopy remains the same as its original installation in 1966. The steel framed, full-width wrap around canopy is covered with stucco and has a simple aluminum fascia, remnants of the original still extant. The corner of the canopy is curved and its ceiling is splayed. This ceiling detail corresponds to the obtuse angle atop each of the storefront openings. The canopy has a cut in on the Main Street façade to accommodate a curb cut drop off area; this alteration dates to 2004 when the new light rail line opened on Main Street. The use of the canopy creates a visual separation between the ground floor and the upper floors, creating a clear "base" of the three part composition with the "shaft" above and capped by the marble cornice band.

⁴⁴ Type Talk: Anatomy of a Character. <http://creativepro.com/typetalk-anatomy-character/>

⁴⁵ Granux is a trade name for a preformed stone, namely polished manufactured granite. It was patented on January 3, 1949 by the Granux Corporation of Chicago. <http://www.trademarkia.com/granux-71571532.html>

Ground Floor Storefronts

The ground floor storefronts correspond to the 6x8 bay composition and have been altered slightly over time to accommodate tenant needs. On the Main Street elevation, the square pilasters in bays 1-3 have been clad with thin red breccia marble tiles. The first three storefronts along Main have fixed aluminum framed, floor-to-ceiling windows with one central vertical mullion. Bay 2 has similar floor to ceiling storefront windows with a central paired door with flanking sidelights; this is the entrance to the former theater (now night club) space. The window heads are flat with an obtuse triangle shape atop that corresponds to the splayed and undulating ceiling of the concrete canopy above. At the end of bay 3 is the double square column indicating the two adjacent outer walls of what was once the two separate buildings. The columns in bays 4 through 6 are clad with the same white marble as the pilasters, belt course and cornice above. The entrance to the building is in the fourth bay and has a non-original, anodized aluminum paired door with flanking sidelights. The remaining bays have this same aluminum framed storefront system. Bay 5 has two floor-to-ceiling glass storefront windows and bay 6, the corner bay, has a recessed entry set back from the building plane and includes a non-original entry into the tenant space. The sixth bay has a permanent, ornamental metal fence between the square column at the corner of Main and Rusk.

On the Rusk elevation, bay 1 has a metal fence surrounding recessed entry. Bays 2 through 4 have equally divided floor-to-ceiling storefronts; the fifth bay is a solid brick wall with a single metal exit door; the sixth and eighth bays are mirror images of each other with paired, solid metal exit doors and the same red breccia marble tiles as seen on the Main Street façade. The seventh bay is solid and covered with a full wall of the red breccia marble tile.

The secondary north and east elevations facing the light court are buff colored brick and have fixed, dark tinted windows; both the brick and windows date to the 1960s. The east tower elevation facing the alley has the same 1960s buff colored brick beginning at Rusk to the exterior fire stair. From the fire stair and northward along the rest of this small elevation, the brick changes to the early twentieth century brick and “scars” of the former window openings and cast stone sills are visible.

Aside from the sliver of brick on the north elevation, there are very few exterior remnants of the early twentieth century buildings. Material remnants of the two construction dates are visible on the roof with the white marble coping on the west and south parapets and typical terra cotta coping caps on the north and east parapets and along the former east-to-west party wall. There are two flat roofed elevator and mechanical penthouses on the roof that date to the 1913 and 1915 construction episodes in addition to the stair penthouse that dates to 1966.

Floor Plan and Interior Details

The building entrance off Main Street is through a set of paired, non-original, aluminum framed doors into a threshold space followed by an identical set of doors. The threshold walls are clad with book-matched, polished white marble. The ceiling is plaster. The building lobby is L-plan and original features include the book-matched polished white marble clad walls. Stainless steel covers the elevator doors and the “transom” spaces above; this detail is repeated on the two stair doors, one to the east and one to the

north of the elevator core. There is a brushed aluminum mail box between the first and second elevator doors and its associated mail chute is extant on the floors above. The original elevator call panel box is on the wall opposite the elevators. An original clock is on the west wall with *sans serif* hour and minute hands and undifferentiated hour marks. The stair door to the east of the elevator bay leads to a staircase original to the 1913 building; this stair was truncated in the 1960s remodeling and only connects the basement and lobby floors. The stair to the north of the elevator core was added in 1966 and its landing is terrazzo at this level only (all other stair landings are concrete). Lobby alterations over time include the black tile flooring (installed over the original terrazzo), recessed black granite baseboard and an acoustical grid ceiling

The upper floors are each a uniform L-plan with an open elevator lobby with three elevator doors facing south. A free-standing square structural column is in the southwest corner of each of the upper floor elevator lobbies. From the elevator lobby, the short corridor, the “leg” of the L-plan extends to the north; the longer corridor, the “stem” extends to the east. The corridors are carpeted, the walls a combination of plaster and gypsum board, and the ceilings are acoustical tiles in a metal grid frame. The doors have unornamented metal frames and the majority of the original doors are unpainted wood veneer. A fire exit door is at the end of the east corridor that leads to the exterior fire stair. An interior fire stair is along the north corridor.

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CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

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The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by The Historic Preservation Office, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation

(a) The HAHC, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

S	NA	S - satisfies	D - does not satisfy	NA - not applicable
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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Houston Bar Center at 723 Main Street.

HAHC RECOMMENDATION

The Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Houston Bar Center at 723 Main Street.

EXHIBIT A

PHOTO

THE HOUSTON BAR CENTER
723 MAIN STREET



EXHIBIT B

PHOTO

THE HOUSTON BAR CENTER
723 MAIN STREET



EXHIBIT C

PHOTO

THE HOUSTON BAR CENTER
723 MAIN STREET



EXHIBIT D
SITE MAP
THE HOUSTON BAR CENTER
723 MAIN STREET

